

Get a grip

by EARL F. PALMER

I'VE BEEN THINKING about resilience. Resilience can be defined as the ability to upright yourself when stresses move in all directions, but what about resilience when feelings are extreme and the actions of angry or highly excited people are extreme, too?

The first-century followers of Jesus Christ lived in just such a time of confusion and intensity, yet we know from New Testament records that they discovered resources and help from their Lord. not only did they survive, but they were resilient and even positive; they were known by the love they showed to one another and to strangers, too.

Paul describes this help as fruits of the Holy Spirit given to and within ordinary disciples (Gal. 5:19-23). He gives the Christians at Galatia a list of nine: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, meekness and self-control. There is a rhythmic "reverberation" within these fruits of the Spirit that begins with what God gives: his love, his faithfulness, his peace and his kindness. These fruits are then companioned with the fruit of our response in sharing love, joy, patience, faithfulness, teachableness and endurance.

The last fruit in the list is self-control. Paul makes use of a marvelous combined Greek word for this ninth fruit. He puts together the word *ego*, the word for myself and my desires, with the word *grasp*. Here, Paul is describing the fruit of self-limitation; we are to decide for ourselves to let this fruit happen — to get a grasp on my desires, my selfhood and my will. For Paul, it is the good-tasting fruit of a man or woman who trusts in the Lordship of Christ, and his will for our behavior toward those who surround us.

Self-limitation is like the word Paul puts in his final advice to the Philippians: "Let all people know your *moderation*. The Lord is near by." (Phil. 4:5). Later on he will explain this moderation as his secret: "I know how to be abased, I know how to abound. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of keeping my sanity; I can take in stride all things because of Christ who strengthens me." (Translation by Earl Palmer of Phil.

4:11-13) Paul has a grip because Christ has a grip on him.

Self-limitation is the grip on our own ambition and desires that becomes a behavioral life choice of moderation. This self-restraint makes possible the discipline of sudden impulsive actions so that there is time to weigh and test our motives and goals by the greater good of what Jesus Christ has shown to us as his will for our lives and our behavior. Paul tells us of this testing in the next paragraph of Phil. 4:8-9 "whatever is true, honest, just ... do these things." This last fruit on Paul's list, *self-*

control, keeps the highly gifted man and woman checked and balanced so that the power in the giftedness does no harm but does good.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his book of essays "From Under the Rubble," written in 1974, during harsh days in the then-Soviet Union, had this to say in his chapter on repentance and self-limitation. First he offers a pessimistic note: "We are always anxiously on the lookout for ways of curbing the inordinate greed of the *other man*, but no one is heard renouncing his own inordinate greed ... " But for his

positive affirmation he borrows hope from the Gospel: "Here is the true Christian definition of freedom, freedom is *self-restriction* of the self for the sake of others!" He believes it is this very repentance and self-limiting grip on ourselves, chosen by us as a freedom act, that is needed not only for the individual man or woman but for nations too.

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